

The day I started teaching was the day the music died

He plugged in Jerry Lee Lewis's piano and he almost saw Paul Simon... LES WALTON remembers student life during a seismic shift in culture and music

THE difference between the day to day life of a school and the community in which children are brought up is often striking.

As a student in the 'swinging sixties' almost overnight, the gap between those in education institutions and the experience of students in the 'outside world' became enormous.

In 1963 I arrived at college. Since my mid-teens I had been acting almost like a grown up. For a few years I had been going to see rock bands at the Club A'GoGo and even stayed up late on weekends! Talk about culture shock.

There was a curfew in our hall of residence at 10/11 pm with limited visiting hours for friends and family and the 'student common room' was inhabited by studious characters wearing tweed jackets and ties.

The first social event I attended could best be described as a 'tea dance' - an old record player plus cakes. There were no alcohol fuelled student union 'events' as there are today - with the exception of 'Rag Week' - when we would go out to collect money for charity, wearing our college scarves. I wouldn't dream of being seen out without my scarf.

At that time I played in a rock band called the Hustlers. We started out as a 'skiffle band' with a home-made guitar and a bass made out of an old tea chest. A washboard substituted for drums.

We then advanced to 'proper guitars', drums and amplifiers, augmented with a Watkins Echo machine. We all wore 'Beatle jackets' and thought we were the bees' knees. We had the same impact as the Beatles. Whenever we sang girls screamed ... to be let out!

I saw the Beatles at the Majestic Dance Hall on Westgate Road, now called the O2 Academy. The Beatles were clearly so different to other bands.

By 1962 they were playing eight hours per night, seven nights per week. By 1964, the Beatles had played over 1,200 concerts together. By way of comparison, most bands today don't play 1,200 times in their entire career.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers* says it takes roughly ten thou-



> Singer Jerry Lee Lewis in 1964

sand hours of practice to achieve mastery in a field. Natural talent is not important. Based on this thinking many educational theorists say help children more by praising hard work than emphasising their 'innate intelligence'.

The club scene in Newcastle was, I believe, the best in the UK. The resident band in the Club A'GoGo was, of course, the Animals and House of the Rising Sun, their revolutionary first folk-rock hit, had just made number one in 1964.

Nearly every Saturday night we would watch fantastic bands, drink rum and blacks, whilst the women had their usual snowballs. Regularly we would go to see American artists such as Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis.

I was standing by the piano when Jerry Lee Lewis played the Club A'GoGo in February 1963. He actually asked ME to plug the lead into his piano. Many years later when I established the School Improvement Team in Bradford we all shared our most interesting moments. Mine was Jerry Lee Lewis.

I was immediately trumped by Kevin McAleese CBE a headteacher from Harrogate who said he had been boarded by pirates whilst sailing in the Indian Ocean!

I'm still getting trumped. Last week Nick Hurn OBE, a Gateshead headteacher, told me he taught David Beckham football. Sometimes you just want to give up!

When I became President of the Social Union we did a very simple thing. Using contacts through the various entertainment agencies, (Jack Wright Newcastle, Terry Blood London and of course Brian Epstein Liverpool) we began to book our favourite bands. The Big Three, Heinz and the Tornados, the Foremost,

Tony Rivers and the Castaways and the band which still has the reputation for producing the best UK rock and roll record ever, 'Shaking All Over', Johnny Kidd and the Pirates. Shortly after performing at our college dance Johnny was killed in a car accident on October 7, 1966.

Of course we also had disappointments. Often we would book an artist and then they would have a 'hit record'. Their agents would then inform us that they were no longer available. This happened with Alan Price when he made 'I put a spell on you'.

Our biggest 'miss' was when my good friend Tony Coleman decided to book an unknown folk singer from the USA. The week before he was due to sing we were told we were having a replacement, who turned out to be a country singer dressed like a cowboy. The act we had originally booked had just had his first big UK hit, 'I am a Rock'. He was Paul Simon.

So my greatest claims to fame are plugging in Jerry Lee Lewis' piano and nearly seeing Paul Simon.

To be a student during these seismic shifts in culture and music was incredible.

However, when I started teaching I was asked to get my hair cut and always wear a tie. I could only use surnames when speaking to my fellow teachers. Female teachers were expected to wear 'bright colourful dresses'. Rock and roll was dead as far as my headteacher was concerned.

Today we still continue to maintain the gap between school life and the 'outside world'. Perhaps it is necessary. Perhaps young people would not want it any other way. After all, who wants groovy headteachers?

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